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ABSTRACT

This study defined "preference types" (types of people who use various media) and looked at constructs people used in deciding their preferences. Preferences in one medium were compared with preferences in another medium for the same group of people. The six media studied were television, radio, movies, magazines, brand commercials, and political messages. Q-methodology was used in the design and execution of the study. A balanced-block design of four style and content elements (reality, moral value, and complexity, and seriousness) was used as the basis for building a Q-sort instrument for each medium. Factor analysis was used to develop a set of six basic preference types: the information-seeker, the entertainment-seeker, the youth-oriented type, the sophisticate, the human interest type, and the successful-adjustment-to-life type. Each preference type is explained in terms of the preference constructs shared by the members. Analysis of individual cases indicates that there are more similarities in individual preferences across the media than there are differences. (Author/JK)

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MASS MEDIA PREFERENCE PATTERNS:

A CROSS-MEDIA STUDY

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(Mass Communication Division)

Abstract

This study was designed to gain insight into the following questions.

(1) What constructs do people use in deciding their preferences in each medium?

(2) What preference types can be found in each medium?

(3) Are there similarities in preference types from medium to medium, or across the media?

(4) Are people generally consistent in their preferences across the media?

A review of the literature reveals the need for greater interrelatedness of studies of preference in the mass media. Many of the recent studies, however, contribute important substantive findings and methodological advances in the study of media preferences.

This study extends preference research horizontally from television to include other mass media. Q-methodology was used in the design and execution of the study. A balanced-block design of four construct elements (Reality, Moral Value, Complexity, and Seriousness) was used as the basis for building six Q-sort instruments. One instrument was for each medium being studied: television, radio, movies, magazines, brand commercials, and political messages. Each instrument contained

thirty-six items. Same-numbered items in each instrument represented the same combination of elements. The items were hypothetical selections available to a person in that medium. Thirty-five people sorted all six instruments on a modified normal-curve distribution.

Factor analysis was used to develop a set of preference types within each medium. A total of twenty factors were developed for the six media. Similarities were noted in certain factors from medium to medium. This resulted in abstracting the six "basic preference types": the Information Seeker, the Entertainment Seeker, the Youth-Oriented, the Sophisticate, the Human-Interest, and the Successful-Adjustment-to-Life type. The types are explained in terms of the preference constructs they share.

Analysis of individual cases indicates that individual preferences across the media are more alike than unalike.

MASS MEDIA PREFERENCE PATTERNS:

A CROSS-MEDIA STUDY

(Mass Communication Division)

What kind of television viewer are you? Are you the type who prefers an informative program, perhaps a documentary or a "news special" analyzing the facts of some important national problem? Or are you the type who prefers an entertainment program, possibly a comedy show with a touch of fantasy? If so, do you prefer the same things in movies? Or on radio? And do you instinctively turn to the same kind of material in magazines that you prefer in television, on radio, or at the movies? Are the "commercials" you prefer equally informative, (or entertaining, or whatever), as the programs you prefer? What elements underlie your preferences? Do you tend to like a serious, factual presentation no matter what the medium? Are there certain combinations of these elements which keep recurring?

These are some of the questions which made me curious about the consistency of people's preference patterns across the mass media. There has been a great deal of research activity studying audience preferences in the mass media. Most of these studies, however, deal with only one medium per study. I wanted to know how preferences in one medium compared with preferences in another medium.

Neil Macdonald pointed out the need for a cross-media preference study. In his own study, entitled Television Drama Preference Choice, he noted the unrelatedness of most of the media preference studies.

> Examination of the literature reveals the unrelated nature of the vast majority of studies concerning preference choice.
>
> There has just been no integration of material. Data concerning viewer characteristics haven't been related to data concerning content characteristics. Data dealing with aspects of the various media---whether traits of readers, listeners, or viewers or content ingredients of books, comic strips, movies, radio or tv programs---have all remained relatively isolated.1

This study was designed to gain insight into the following questions.

(1) What constructs do people use in deciding their preferences in each medium?

(2) What preference types can be found in each medium?

(3) Are there similarities in preference types from medium to medium, or across the media?

(4) Are people generally consistent in their preferences across the media?

It seemed to me that in order to answer the need for a cross-media study, such a study should do the following things.

(1) Define messages in terms of the constructs people use in deciding their preferences among messages.

(2) Use the same set of constructs for messages in all of the media in order to provide a common framework within which to make comparisons across the media.

(3) Define people in terms of their preferences among messages.

(4) Compare people's preferences in one medium with their preferences in other media.

A number of research studies have been reported in recent years which explore audience preferences in the mass media. Most often, they deal with preferences among television programs. Almost all of the studies provide a set of "elements" or "dimensions" which are hypothesized to underlie a person's perceptions of the programs and to help him determine his preferences. An important development in many of these studies is the use of clustering techniques to discover "types" of viewers within the audience. In some studies, the authors go on to suggest ways that preference theory can be used to help create programs which will maximize the viewer's enjoyment. Some studies also suggest the interrelatedness of preferences in the mass media.

I have quoted Neil Macdonald on the need for relatedness in mass media preference studies. From his extensive review of the literature on mass media preferences, he abstracted a set of variables which may be operating in people's preferences.[2] Robert Monaghan developed a set of facet elements which he coded into a Q-instrument containing descriptions of real programs.[3] Using Q-methodology, he developed six types of viewers, including three personal preference types and three actual viewing types. David Rarick developed a set of facet

elements to include the visual aspects of program preference.[4] He used two Q-instruments to study stability of preferences over time. In addition, he used McQuitty's elementary linkage analysis to develop six preference types.[5]

William R. Hazard and his colleagues established a set of twelve "non-topical" scales for analyzing television programs, six for form analysis, and six for content analysis.[6] Bradley Greenberg factor-analyzed responses to a set of semantic-differential scales to discover the dimensions which adult producers and children viewers applied to a television program.[7] Lawrence Schneider used Q-methodology to cluster people according to their orientation to television.[8] L. Erwin Atwood used Q-methodology to define program preference types for teenagers, their fathers, and their mothers.[9] James Flynn studied audience perceptions of the "images" of real television stations, and compared them with the Ideal station and the Average station.[10] People Q-sorted statements describing programming practices, once for each station. Then, for each station, he defined a set of types according to the way each type saw that station.

Some studies have concerned themselves with ways to use preference research to help create new television programs which will maximize the viewer's enjoyment. Tom Harries developed a thirty-six-item Q-sort consisting of descriptions of hypothetical television programs, based on a set of facet-elements.[11] He asked people to sort the instrument

according to personal preference and the "public interest". Then he developed a set of audience types for each sorting. He explored the possibilities of developing programs specifically for each preference type. Malcolm MacLean and Edgar Crane employed a wide range of methodologies, including linkage analysis, in a study to help educational broadcasters do a better job of programming for their audiences.[12] One interesting feature was that the authors developed "program packages", or combinations of programs, to help the station program director prepare a schedule. The program packages were based on preference types within the audience.

Robert Monaghan and his colleagues conducted preference research for MGM-Television to help that studio develop its Girl From U.N.C.L.E. series.[13] Three Q-instruments were developed and sorted according to personal preferences. Preference types were defined within the audience, and recommendations were made to MGM on ways to reach the largest potential "target" audience. Joseph Plummer carried the process a step further by developing a set of preference research procedures to accompany each step in the creation of a new television program from idea to finished product.[14] He demonstrated the practicality of using these procedures by helping create a new program series for an educational television station.[15]

Some other studies have applied these methods of preference research to other media. William Stephenson, who has contributed most heavily to the development of Q-methodology, reports a number of these studies in his new book The Play Theory of Mass Communication.[16] In Chapter 11, he cites a number of studies which have developed types of news readers. He notes that basically the same three factors, or types, keep reappearing: the mature newsreader, the non-pleasure readers, and the pleasure readers. Joseph Plummer studied preference patterns which exist in radio listening.[17] He built four Q-instruments, each concerned with different aspects of radio listening, and used McQuitty's linkage analysis to develop a set of types for each instrument.

David Erickson's study provides an interesting example of the use of preference research to help find the best media vehicle for a persuasive message.[18] Essentially, he wanted to find ways to persuade the public to adopt proper wildlife conservation practices. He built two Q-instruments, one for attitudes toward wildlife, and the other for preferences among television programs. Both instruments were administered to the same people. He then developed a set of types for each instrument, compared the membership of the wildlife attitude and program preference types, and was able to make some recommendations for matching persuasive message with programming context.

The best single statement of the theoretical rationale for my selection of methodology is found in an article entitled "Creative Strategies in Audience Analysis" written by Robert Monaghan for the April, 1968 issue of Educational Broadcasting Review.[19] The rationale articulated there has influenced much of the recent research work studying media preferences, especially television program preferences. In essence, Monaghan proposes that we try to look at television programs through the viewer's own eyes. Only then can we begin to understand the viewer's logic in preferring one program over another. We can then discover the constructs which he uses in making his viewing decisions. We can begin to predict his viewing behavior. We can relate him to others who share similar constructs and preferences. Perhaps we can build programs which will maximize his enjoyment of the medium and maximize its usefulness to him. Monaghan proposes accomplishing this through, for example, a combination of in-depth interviewing techniques, the use of repertory grid tests, and various clustering procedures.

This study extended that rationale and its methodology horizontally from television to include several other mass media. Then, comparisons of the data were made across the media. This resulted in the six "basic preference types" which cut across the media.

The basic theory of media preference decision-making postulated in this study is based on George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory.[20] A set of four constructs believed to be operating strongly in people's media preferences were used as the basis for building the instruments. These constructs include Reality, Moral Conflict, Complexity, and Seriousness. Table I shows a break-down of these constructs.

William Stephenson's Q Methodology was used in building the instruments, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the data.[21] The four constructs were built into a balanced-block design. This yielded a total of thirty-six possible combinations of the construct elements of style and content. Based on these combinations of elements, six Q-sort instruments were built, one for each medium I wanted to study: television, radio, movies, magazines, consumer brand commercials, and political messages.

Each instrument contained thrity-six items. Same-numbered items in each instrument represented the same combination of construct elements. The items in each instrument were hypothetical selections available to a person in that medium, (such as television programs, magazine articles, toothpaste commercials, etc.). Each instrument was checked by inter-judge panel agreement and refined to be sure the items represented the constructs assigned to them.

TABLE I

BALANCED-BLOCK DESIGN OF ELEMENTS OF STYLE AND CONTENT USED IN INSTRUMENTS

CONSTRUCTS	ELEMENTS OF STYLE AND CONTENT			
REALITY	A 1 BELIEVABLE FACTS	A 2 BELIEVABLE FICTION	A 3 UNBELIEVABLE FICTION, FANTASY	
MORAL VALUE	B 1 MORAL INTELLECTUAL	B 2 MORAL SENTIMENTAL	B 3 NO MORAL	
COMPLEXITY	C 1 HIGH COMPLEXITY		C 2 LOW COMPLEXITY	
SERIOUSNESS	D 1 COMEDY		D 2 SERIOUS	

Thirty-five people were interviewed. These people represent a wide cross-section of demographic variables and life-styles. Each person sorted each of the six instruments on a modified normal-curve distribution.

Factor analysis was used to develop a set of preference types within each medium. This was done by correlating the sortings of all thirty-five people on one medium, such as television. The correlation matrix of persons was factored. This clustered together those persons who share similar preferences within that medium. Rotated factors which accounted for seven percent or more of the variance were reported and considered to form a "preference type".

Inferences about the preferences of each type were made by first building a data array and then interpreting the array. The original sortings of those persons who loaded .70 or higher on a factor were used in making the arrays.

A set of factors, or preference types, was defined for each of the six media studied. Then, I compared the types from each medium with the types from every other medium. By noting the similarities in types from medium to medium, I was able to discover six "basic preference types" which cut across the media. Table II shows the relationships of the various types across the media.

TABLE II

DISTRIBUTION OF PREFERENCE TYPES ACROSS THE MEDIA

Television Programs	Radio Programs	Movies	Magazin
Information Seeker Factor I (Younger) and Factor II (Older)	Information Seeker Factor III (Critic) and Factor IV (Sports Fan)	Information Seeker Factor I	Information Factor
Entertainment Seeker Factor III	Entertainment Seeker Factor II		Entertainment Factor II
Youth-Oriented Factor IV			Youth-Orien Factor II
The Sophisticate Factor V	The Sophisticate Factor I		
		Human Interest Factor II	
		Successful Adjustment to Life Factor III	

Movies	Magazines	Toothpaste Commercials	Political Messages
formation Seeker Factor I	Information Seeker Factor I	Information Seeker Factor II	Information Seeker Factor I
	Entertainment Seeker Factor II	Entertainment Seeker Factor I	Entertainment Seeker Factor II
	Youth-Oriented Factor III		Youth-Oriented Factor III
Human Interest Factor II			
Successful ustment to Life Factor III			

The six basic preference types include: (1) the Information Seeker, (2) the Entertainment Seeker, (3) the Youth-Oriented type, (4) the Sophisticate, (5) the Human Interest type, and (6) the Successful-Adjustment-to-Life type. The basic types, however, are not evenly distributed across all of the media.

The Information Seeker is a type of person who is looking for information when he turns to the media. He is looking for information about the real world around him, and he wants that information presented in a believable form. The Reality construct is most important to him. He prefers messages which give him facts about the real world presented in a believable manner. He rejects messages about any unreal world presented in the unbelievable forms of fantasy. The conflict dimension is also important to him. He prefers that his messages have no moral conflict, or that it be an intellectual moral conflict if one is present. He rejects the simpler sentimental moral conflict between clearly-labeled "good" and "bad". The Complexity construct is not so important to him, although he is more likely to prefer highly complex messages rather than those which are low in complexity. He appears to have no clear-cut preference for either humorous or serious messages. Essentially, the Information Seeker is a person who comes to the media looking for information about the real world, presented in a believable form.

The Entertainment Seeker comes to the media looking for "fun". He prefers messages which are humorous and fantastic. The most important construct for him is the Humorous--Serious one. The Entertainment Seeker almost always prefers those messages which contain an element of humor, or "the light touch". He almost always rejects messages which are serious in presentation. The reality construct is also important to him. He generally prefers fantasy to reality, and often rejects those messages which are believable. The moral conflict and complexity constructs are not so important to him. The Entertainment Seeker, then, prefers messages which are humorous and unbelievable, and rejects messages which are real, believable, and serious.

The Youth-Oriented type is usually a young person who prefers media messages which are about subjects of interest to young people today. The constructs Youth---Adult and Interesting---Boring appear to be more important to him than the element constructs coded into the messages. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a tendency to prefer messages which are believable, moral-sentimental, and difficult to predict; while rejecting messages which are too serious and too easily predicted.

The Sophisticate is the type of person who wants "the best" of messages available in a medium. He is the type of viewer the Television Information Office appears to have in mind when it prepares its monthly list of the best programs available in

commercial television. He would also enjoy the kind of programming presented by the Public Broadcasting Laboratory, good-music FM radio, a challenging "talk" show on AM radio, or the like. He has a clear preference for believability, intellectual morality, high complexity, and seriousness in messages. He rejects fantasy and sentimental morality. The Sophisticate is a "thinking man" type.

The Human Interest type is distinguished by his preference for messages which are about people and their problems. He rejects messages which are about abstract things. He has a strong Human---Non Human construct. In addition, he prefers messages which are believable, highly complex, and serious. He rejects messages which feature fantasy and "shades of gray" intellectual morality. The humans who are the center of his interest do not always turn out to be life's "winners". The Human Interest type is concerned about people and the problems they face living in this real world.

The Successful Adjustment to Life type is also interested in people and their problems, and also prefers messages which are believable and serious, while rejecting messages which feature fantasy and humor. He is distinguished by a strong Success---Escape construct. He prefers messages about people who successfully make a personal adjustment to life. His heroes are life's "winners". He rejects messages about people who fail to meet life's challenges, who eventually "escape". He also rejects messages which inject science

into our personal lives. This type prefers messages about people who make a successful adjustment to life.

I also attempted to use another approach to look at the consistency of individual persons' preference patterns across the media. The approach was that of the single-case Q study, or the O analysis.[22] The design called for correlating the six media sorts for each person. The matrix was then factored to cluster together those media which "go together" in a person's media preference decision-making. The results of this phase of the study are inconclusive. The problems appear to be due mainly to the difficulty of establishing cross-media reliability in the instruments.

A number of individual cases, however, were studied. In each case, the similarities among the cross-media factors are much greater than the differences. This observation has led me to postulate a theory of individual cross-media preference based on Kelly's theory of personal constructs. It seems likely that within a person's construct system there are a few major constructs which pervade the media. Also within his system are subordinate constructs which he applies to specific media. The subordinate constructs are subsumed by the major, super-ordinate constructs. Thus, the similarities in a person's preferences among the media appear greater than the differences.

NOTES

[1]Neil William Macdonald, Television Drama Preference Choice University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, June, 1966, p.2. (Mimeographed.)

[2]Neil Macdonald, Ibid., p.356.

[3]Robert R. Monaghan, "Television Preference and Viewing Behavior" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1964.)

[4]David Rarick, "Predicting Viewer Preferences for Visual Appeals in Television Programs," (unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1967.)

[5]Louis L. McQuitty, "Elementary Linkage Analysis for Isolating Orthogonal and Oblique Types and Typal Relevancies," Educational and Psychological Measurement, XVII (2) (Summer, 1957), 209-29.

[6]William R. Hazard, J. David Moriaty, Victoria C. Timmons, "A Nontopical System of TV Program Categories," Audio Visual Communications Review, 12 (2) (Summer, 1964), 146--63.

[7]Bradley S. Greenberg, "Television for Children: Dimensions of Communicator and Audience Perceptions," Audio Visual Communications Review, 13 (4) (1965) 385-96.

[8]Lawrence Schneider, "Television in the Lives of Teenagers and Their Parents," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1967). Abstract.

[9]L. Erwin Atwood, "Perception of Television Program Preferences Among Teenagers and their Parents," Journal of Broadcasting, XII (4) (Fall, 1968), 377-88.

[10]James Henry Flynn, "Television Station Image: A Q-Methodology Study" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1969).

[11]Tom Harries, "The Systematic Creation of a New Television Program," (unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1966).

[12]Malcolm MacLean and Edgar Crane, Rating Scales, Program Types, and Audience Segments, Michigan State University, East Lansing, April, 1960. (Mimeographed.)

[13]Robert Monaghan, Joseph Plummer, David Rarick, and Dwight Williams, Recommended Target Audience and Appeal Elements for the Girl from U.N.C.L.E., Columbus, September, 1966. (Mimeographed.)

[14]Joseph T. Plummer, "A Systematic Research Approach to Television Program Development" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1967).

[15]Joseph T. Plummer, "Audience Research in Television Program Development," Educational Broadcasting Review, II (3) (June, 1968), 23-30.

[16]William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[17]Joseph T. Plummer, "Q-Methodology in Radio Audience Research and the Analysis of Formula Radio," (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1965).

[18]David L. Erickson, "Attitudes About Wildlife and Preferences in Television Programs: A Communication Study," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1969).

[19]Robert R. Monaghan, "Creative Strategies in Audience Analysis," Educational Broadcasting Review, II (2) (April, 1968), 29--37.

[20]George A. Kelly, A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955).

[21]William Stephenson, The Study of Behavior (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

[22]Malcolm S. MacLean, "Some Multivariate Designs for Communications Research," Journalism Quarterly, 42 (Autumn, 1965), 614-22.